

Father who torched his young son soon will be released from prison

The Associated Press

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SAN LUIS OBISPO — A man who set his young son ablaze and left him to die in a motel room nearly seven years ago is scheduled to be freed from prison in two weeks, authorities said.

Charles Rothenberg is scheduled to be paroled from the California Men's Colony on Jan. 24, said prison spokesman Ted McAlister.

"He was due to be paroled last month, but because of disciplinary action the time was extended," McAlister said. Officials

have said Rothenberg arranged to have a visitor deliver a letter to his ex-wife in violation of prison regulations.

The one-time waiter and cab driver was involved in a bitter custody dispute over his son, David, when he took the boy to an Orange County motel in March 1983, doused him with kerosene and set him on fire.

Rothenberg told authorities he planned to kill his son and commit suicide but "chickened out."

The boy, now 13, has undergone more than 50 operations.

The jig is up for Rothenberg

SUN APR 1 1990

When a person whose whereabouts are kept secret for his own protection announces to the world his location, why should the authorities continue protecting him?

That's the question the state Department of Corrections must answer to the satisfaction of California taxpayers as they watch new Oakland resident Charles Rothenberg make a spectacle of himself.

Rothenberg will go down in infamy as the man who, after a custody dispute with his former wife, deliberately set fire to his son in 1983. The gasoline-fed flame left David Rothenberg, now 13, gravely disfigured over 90 percent of his body.

Rothenberg served a mere six-and-one-half years in prison before the state was required last January to release him. Under current law, the state could have kept him in prison much longer.

Because the boy, who lives with his mother in Southern California, fears his father will hurt him again, the Department of Corrections vowed to parole Rothenberg to a location far from there. In January, information leaked out indicating Rothenberg had been paroled to Oakland.

Several local officials prematurely threw a fit. They charged the state with using Alameda County as a dumping ground for dangerous parolees.

Actually Alameda County gets no greater share of state parolees than other counties. And as long as the state kept Rothenberg on a short leash and he maintained a low profile, neither he nor county residents had anything to fear.

Rothenberg trashed that understanding

last week when he called the Los Angeles Times and announced that he lives and works in Oakland. He added that he didn't much care for the neighborhood, but had been out to a number of restaurants, including "some really nice places." Rothenberg said that he was lonely and wanted "to live like a normal person."

He didn't tell the parole agent guarding him that he was calling a newspaper. He knew the state feared that revealing where he lived would create a media "mob scene." Rothenberg also noted that James Rowland, Department of Corrections director, told him in a February visit that the 24-hour supervision he finds so burdensome could be dropped as early as this summer if he continued to keep a low profile.

By refusing to follow Rowland's advice, Rothenberg made it clear that he is, among other things, an exhibitionist who has no intention of living a normal life while on parole. The state should make it equally clear that it will stop protecting him if he seeks inflammatory publicity.

Much of the \$18,000-a-month cost of keeping Rothenberg on parole goes to the salaries of agents who are guarding him around the clock. The state should stop protecting a man who apparently doesn't want to be protected.

The state's real responsibility is to protect Rothenberg's son from an unwanted visit by his natural — some might say unnatural — father. Rothenberg wears an electronic bracelet to signal his movements to parole authorities. For his own good, he should think about wearing a gag as well.

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Parolee who burned son back in jail

TUE SEP 11 1990

By Carolyn Marshall
The Tribune

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After serving six years in prison and being paroled, the man who tried to murder his son by setting him ablaze was sent back to prison yesterday for violating parole in Oakland, the state Department of Corrections said.

Charles Rothenberg whose parole to Alameda County on January 24 enraged local offi-

cials almost as much as his crime enraged the nation, was picked up in Oakland yesterday. He was sent to San Quentin. He had eluded a parole agent for more than four hours which could result in an extra year of parole and keep him imprisoned for up to 180 days, officials said.

"He deliberately deceived his parole officer. He knew the rules. He knew the penalty if he

violated the rules," said Tip Kindel, a spokesman for the Department of Corrections.

Rothenberg has been living in Oakland and is required to remain within Alameda County borders during his three-year parole term. He was convicted of attempted murder and arson in 1983 after he set his son, David, on fire in an Orange County motel.

The fire started after Rothenberg, who psychiatrists once described as a sociopath, took a can of kerosene and poured it around the bed of his sleeping son, then age 6.

After igniting the fuel, he fled. Moments later, the motel room erupted into a wild blaze. Little David survived but suffered

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third-degree burns. The boy has weathered a string of operations and skin grafts. His arms, face and legs remain scarred and his fingers were amputated to the first joint.

Rothenberg was sentenced to a 13-year prison term. He served six years and five months of the sentence before his parole this year.

Rothenberg was arrested at an unidentified Oakland location shortly after 11 a.m., Kindel said. The 50-year-old ex-convict had been permitted to leave his Oakland home at 7:30 a.m. yesterday to go to a job interview. He was required to notify parole officers of his every movement and remained under constant surveillance, Kindel said.

But while en route to the job interview, he stepped into a donut shop and disappeared, Kindel said. The parole agent following him waited nearby, but after 15 minutes, he knew Rothenberg was gone, Kindel said.

Authorities then received a phone call from Rothenberg, who gave a new description of his whereabouts, but never showed up. He eventually appeared at the job interview and was taken into custody, Kindel said. He was missing for approximately four hours.

"No one is able to piece together any real explanation," Kindel said. "But he has known all along that, because of the severity of his crime, he would have to prove himself to authorities if there's to be any modification of the parole terms. This kind of behavior just cannot be tolerated."

Rothenberg was reportedly delivered to San Quentin State Prison at 5 p.m., Kindel said. He

was placed in a single cell in the adjustment center where he will remain isolated until prison officials can determine whether it's appropriate to place him in the main inmate area.

Kindel said the Board of Prison Terms will hold a special hearing within 45 to 60 days to determine the outcome of Rothenberg's violations. After the Department of Corrections presents its case, Rothenberg will be permitted to present a defense, Kindel said. Depending on the strength of the charges, the prison board can return Rothenberg to prison for up to six months. The violations also may result in a one-year extension of parole, placing his discharge in January 1994, rather than January 1993.

Rothenberg was ordered not to leave Alameda County, not to contact his son, ex-wife or his son's stepfather without permission. He was participating in an electronic surveillance program, always wearing a device that lets officials know his whereabouts.

"A lot of people misunderstand the concept of parole," Kindel said. "Parolees are kept under really close tabs until we can see how they behave."

Until yesterday, Rothenberg seemed a model ex-convict, Kindel said. He had been looking for a job since the first day of parole, although no one has wanted to hire him.

Kindel said Rothenberg has been candid with potential employers about his identity. Most of his job prospects were provided by the Department of Corrections.

Kindel said there is no evidence that Rothenberg tried to leave Alameda County or contact his son in Orange County.

Parole violator says he was 'set up'

SUN SEP 16 1990

By The Tribune staff and news services

LOS ANGELES — The man convicted of torching his 6-year-old son in a motel room denied he violated his parole last week by ducking out of an Oakland doughnut shop to elude a corrections agent.

Charles Rothenberg said he was looking for a job and did not violate conditions of his parole when he disappeared for four hours on Monday.

"I now believe I've been set up!" Rothenberg said in a letter to the Los Angeles Times.

"The parole agent told me he would assist with employment. He's taken too long, gone on four vacations, had a face lift, gone to golf games and I sit doing nothing," Rothenberg wrote from his cell at San Quentin state prison, where he awaits a hearing on the alleged parole violation.

The Times said it received the letter Friday. Excerpts were published in yesterday's editions.

"My parole conditions state I can go anywhere I want in Ala-

Charles Rothenberg tells newspaper he was just looking for a job.

meda County from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. It's as clear as daylight," said Rothenberg, 50.

Corrections officials could not be reached for comment.

Rothenberg set fire to his son, David, in a Buena Park motel room in March 1983 after a telephone argument in which his estranged wife said he would not be allowed to see the boy again. The child lived with his mother in New York and had been vacationing with Rothenberg in California.

David, dragged from the inferno by motel guests, suffered third-degree burns over 90 percent of his body. Now 14, he lives with his mother and stepfather in Southern California and said he was happy his father was back in jail.

His parole to Alameda County in January enraged local offi-

cials and communities almost as much as his crime enraged the nation. Rothenberg's four-hour escape on Monday simply underscored what some local officials feel is inadequate protection for Oakland citizens.

"At least I'll have some peace of mind while he's in San Quentin," said Alameda County Sheriff Charles Plummer last week.

"They had the opportunity to prove what they said they could do — and they couldn't do it," said Don Perata, chairman of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, on Tuesday. "Now they should try some other community."

Rothenberg was convicted of attempted murder, arson and other charges and received a 13-year prison term.

After serving about half that, he was released in January for

good behavior and placed on three years' parole. Under terms of the parole, he was watched around-the-clock and wore an electronic anklet so his whereabouts could be monitored.

State Corrections Department spokesman Tipton C. Kindel said that Rothenberg went with a parole agent to a job interview in Oakland on Monday, only to find the business closed. The agent allowed him to wait inside a doughnut shop.

Kindel said Rothenberg left through a side or back door and called a second agent to say he was at another job interview.

That agent told Rothenberg to stay put but he left again, Kindel said.

Agents found him about four hours later and he was returned to prison, Kindel said.

In the letter to the newspaper, Rothenberg did not address the allegations he eluded the parole agents.

If convicted of the parole violation, Rothenberg could face a maximum six months in jail.

THE STATE IN BRIEF

FRI OCT 19 1990

Parole revoked for man who burned son

SAN QUENTIN — A man who was convicted of setting fire to his son in 1983 will stay in San Quentin Prison because he violated his parole, officials ruled yesterday.

Charles Rothenberg's parole will be revoked for eight months, said Jim Dowling, spokesman for the Board of Prison Terms. He said the revocation dates back to Sept. 10 when Rothenberg was arrested in Oakland.

Rothenberg was en route to a job interview in Oakland with a parole agent when he ducked out of a doughnut shop and eluded authorities for a while.